DR. JOHN POTT: AMERICA'S FIRST PHYSICIAN-GOVERNOR AND REVOLUTIONARY

CHARLES E. HORTON, JR., AND
CHARLES E. HORTON, M.D.

Associate Dean
Eastern Virginia Medical School
Norfolk, Virginia

THE first permanent English settlement in America was established at Jamestown, Va., in 1607. The colonization effort was organized and directed by the London Company, a private joint stock company whose shareholders included British noblemen, knights, many merchants, and physicians. These men were interested in profit at least as much as in British patriotism, and realized that if their investment were to succeed, they must ensure good standards of health care in the new settlement. Thus, in planning the colony, the London Company provided the settlers with outstanding physicians who were among the best educated in Europe. Among the most interesting of these early physicians was Dr. John Pott, who became the first physician-governor in America, serving in that capacity for one year beginning in March 1628. Pott achieved further notoriety by leading the first armed revolt against British authority in the New World in 1634. As will be seen, Dr. Pott's career in Jamestown continually fluctuated between the illustrious and the scandalous.

John Pott was born in Cheshire, England, around 1595. He was graduated Master of Arts at Cambridge University, and apparently was a highly regarded physician. When the previous physician for the Virginia colony, Dr. Bohun, was killed during an encounter with two Spanish ships of war, Pott was recommended to the company by the famous Censor of the Royal College of Physicians, Dr. Theodorick Gulstone, "as well practiced in chirurgerie and physic and expert also in the distilling of waters." The company directors "agreed that Dr. Pott should have the place on the same conditions as Dr. Bohun, with the addition of a Chest of Physique of 20 lb. and 10 lb for books of physique ... also free passage for Dr. Pott, his wife, a man and a maid, and for one or more chirurgeons, if they could be procured."[1]

When Dr. Pott arrived in Virginia in November 1621 it became obvious that although he was a "gentleman" in an extremely class conscious society, he possessed an unusually congenial disposition and was not above socializing with the common man. Another colonist, George Sandys, wrote that Pott soon developed a reputation for "tasting distilled waters and at times was more of a boon companion than quite comported with his dignity ... at first he kept company too much with his inferiors, who hung upon him while his good liquor lasted." Regardless of his indiscriminate behavior, or perhaps because of it, Pott soon became a popular figure among the colonists. In 1622 Pott was chosen to sit on the Governor's Council, an advisory body to the royal governor who administered the affairs of the Jamestown Colony.

Another event in 1622 was of great significance in shaping the career of Dr. Pott. On March 22 local hostile Indians, the Pamunkey tribe under Chief Openchancanough, attacked the colony and massacred 347 settlers, which represented one third of the total population of the colony. The Indians not only killed the settlers but destroyed their meager food resources as well, causing widespread famine. Many of Dr. Pott's friends were killed, which instilled in the doctor an undying hatred of all Indians. Two years later, in 1624, a large group of friendly Indians was mysteriously poisoned after being invited to a feast under pretenses of peace. This caused considerable scandal in England, where the Earl of Warwick accused Pott of masterminding the scheme and had the doctor dismissed from the Governor's Council. After thorough investigation, Pott was cleared of the charge and restored to his Council seat in 1626. However, the mystery was never solved and Dr. Pott acquired an international reputation as "the poysoner of the salvages."

The 1622 massacre catalyzed another incident that still further clouded Pott's reputation. During the attack the Indians captured several colonists, among them a Mrs. Jane Dickenson. Dr. Pott ransomed her from the Indians for two pounds of glass beads, and apparently planned to claim and to exploit her labor. Ten months after her indenture to Pott, the widow "complaineth to the governor and Council that she was held in servitude that differeth not from her slavery with the Indians." The Council ruled that she be discharged from any obligation to Pott "considering she hath already served ten months, too much for two pounds of beads."[2]

If the doctor's morals were questionable, as a physician Pott appears to have been held in high regard. Pott came to the colony with excellent professional recommendations, and we have every reason to believe that

he lived up to them. He was renowned for his skill in treating "epidemical diseases," especially for alleviating the "seasoning period" characteristic of new arrivals in the colony, which today is thought to have been caused by typhoid infection. The years 1625-1628 are reported unusually healthful ones in Jamestown, largely through the ministrations of Dr. Pott. The doctor regularly kept patients in his own home, where his wife served as a nurse. He commissioned a boat which he sailed up and down the James River to make house calls at various outlying settlements. His typical fee for one of these calls was 30 lbs. of tobacco.

In addition to typhoid, the most common afflictions that Dr. Pott was called on to treat included the nutritional disease scurvy, malaria (for Jamestown was a marshy, mosquito-infested place), smallpox, measles, yellow fever, influenza, and various other "fluxes, fevers, and bellyaches." Although the 17th century witnessed many dramatic medical advances such as William Harvey's elegant experiments proving the closed internal circulation of the blood, the old humoral school persisted in emphasizing the elements of fire, air, earth, and water; the qualities hot, dry, moist, and cold; and the humors blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile. Thus, Dr. Pott vigorously treated his patients according to the foremost medical theory of his day by bleeding, vomiting, and sweating them. Other favorite practices included administering heroic "clysters" or enemas to purge the system, and uroscropy or "water casting," where the physician held a flask of the patient's urine to the light and pronounced grave diagnoses by examining and occasionally even tasting it. Early Virginia physicians were enthusiastic in employing the abundance of medicinal plants which they found in the new land such as sassafras, snake root, cancer root, and dittany. Tobacco was a therapeutic staple for it "purgeth superflous fleame and other grosse humors, openeth all the pores and passages of the body ... and preserveth the body from obstructions." Surgical operations for wounds, fractures, abscesses, and amputations were common, but as a profession surgeons still lacked dignity. The better educated physicians relegated surgical cases to barbers or chirurgeons, two of whom accompanied Dr. Pott to Virginia. Considering these standards of practice, it is not surprising that, although the London Company was proud of supplying its colony with qualified physicians from Europe, by 1625 only 1,095 settlers remained out of 7,549 who had emigrated to Virginia since 1607.[4]

If Pott was a capable physician, as a law abiding citizen he seems to have been somewhat wayward. He appears in the colonial court records in

1625 accused of stealing pigs in what must have been one of the first medical malpractices cases in American. The plaintiff, Mrs. Blany, suggested that "the wante of the [hog] flesh was the occasione of her miscaryinge with childe". It was decided, however, "that there is no damage dew from Doctor Pott because the spoyle they did his corne was as great as the value of the hogs or greater. But his killinge and eatinge of them without a legall order was irregular and lyable to censure...."[3] In 1625 Pott was involved in a lawsuit concerning "certayne cows" which both the doctor and Mr. Clayburne, secretary of the colony, claimed as their own. Pott produced papers proving that the cows were his, and the court placed them in his possession. Pott was brought to court a third time in 1626 by his apprentice Richard Townshend

> complaneing that he cannot be Taught the art of an apothecarye, for the lerninge of wch art and misterye he was bound to ye said Doctr Pott by an Indenture ... the court hath hereupon ordered yt Mr. Doctor Pott doe henceforthe from time to time endeaver to teach and instruct the said Richard Townshen in ye art of an apothecary by all convenient wayes and means he can or may, that soe hee may prove at ye end of his service a sufficient Apothecarye, wch if he ye said Mr. Doctor Pott shall neglect or refuse, the Courte hath ordered yt he shall pay the said Richard Townshend for his services fro ye daye of ye date hereof unto the end and experation thereof.[5]

Regardless of these legal transgressions, Pott remained a popular figure among the colonists. He was also a shrewd politician, and continued to serve as a member of the governor's council. In 1628 King Charles I appointed Sir John Harvey royal governor. Harvey, however, was delayed from occupying his office for almost two years, and in March 1628 John Pott was elected deputy governor by the Council. "This daie the whole body of the council now remaining and resident in the colony did according to his Majesty's letters patent assemble themselves and after full and serious consideration did elect and choose John Pott, Esqu. to the present governor of and for this colony of Virginia."[5] Pott served as deputy governor until March 24, 1629, when Harvey finally arrived in Virginia.

Pott's administration concerned itself primarily with warding off threats from Indians. On August 12, 1629 the aged Chief Openchancanough once again led the Pamunkey, Nansemond, and Chickahominy Indians against the colonists, killing many and taking 11 prisoners. Governor Pott promptly called an assembly which met on October 16, 1629, with 46 burgesses present representing 23 plantations. They voted to raise a militia and to invade the Indian villages three times each year "to doe all manner of spoile and offence to the Indians that may possibly bee effected." This

assembly also passed economic regulations regarding the growing and exportation of tobacco. Pott established new courts in remote parts of the colony: "I John Pott, Esq. Governor and Captain General of Virginia, for the greater ease of inhabitants of dyverse parts of this colony, and for the better observation of the peace, together with the Councell have thought fitt that there shall be monthly courts held and kepte in some in the more remote plaintations...."[7] In October 1629 George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore, visited Virginia. Governor Pott and the Council, apparently suspicious that Baltimore was planning a neighboring and competing colony, treated him rather inhospitably. Knowing that he was Catholic, they insisted that Lord Baltimore take the Oath of Supremacy to the King and the Anglican Church, which Calvert refused to do. By treating Lord Baltimore so rudely, Dr. Pott made a very powerful enemy. Lord Baltimore later returned to England and obtained a royal charter for the establishment of Maryland as an independent colony and a refuge for Catholics and others seeking religious toleration.

Sir John Harvey arrived in March 1629 to assume his office as royal governor. He took an immediate dislike to his predecessor and determined to ruin the popular physician. Pott was dismissed from the Council and charged with "pardoninge wilful murther, marking other men's cattell as his owne, and killing up their hogs". Governor Harvey had Pott thrown into prison. "Many friends offered bail, but the Doctor declined and remained in jail. Hampton never had a more popular prisoner."[8] The jury for the trial, however, was totally subservient to the obvious wishes of Sir John Harvey. Pott was found guilty and confined to his plantation, Harrop, the first settlement in the area of what is now Williamsburg, where he learned that his entire estate was to be confiscated. Further sentencing was suspended "until his Majestie's pleasure" be known.

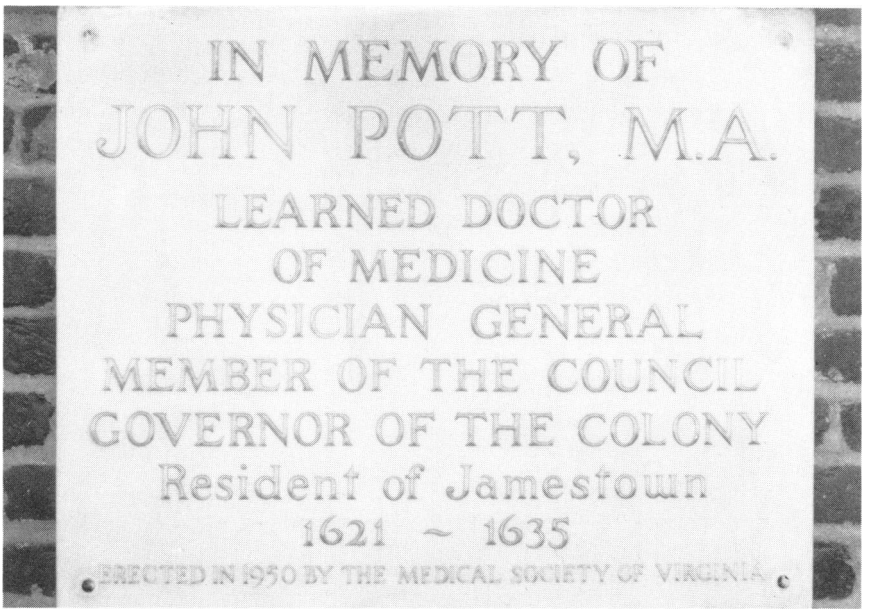
Governor Harvey now faced a sensitive political problem. He fervently desired that Pott be dishonored and banished from the colony. The physician, however, had much popular support and, in addition, his skills as a physician were still desperately required by the colony. Pott's wife rose from her sickbed and returned to England to plead her husband's case before the king. Apparently Harvey had little choice but to extricate himself from a difficult political situation as gracefully as possible. The governor therefore appealed to the king to pardon Dr. Pott, "as he was by far the best physician in the colony ... skilled in epidemicals." Pott was subsequently pardoned, his estate was returned, and he resumed his medical practice in the colony. After 1630, however, Pott was never again

restored to his seat on the Council.

Sir John Harvey's tumultuous beginning as royal governor was an indication of the remainder of this administration. From the start he quarreled with the Council, claiming that their function was only to advise and to support the governor. The councillors staunchly maintained their independence, and claimed that Harvey could do nothing without their consent. In 1631 Harvey wrote to England compaining of the "waywardness and oppositions of those of the Councell ... for instead of giving me assistance, they stand contesting and disputing my authoritie ... avering that my power extendeth no further than a bare casting voice."[9] Soon the governor and the Council were in open hostility. Popular support was with the Council; Harvey was regarded as an arbitrary, despotic governor, and was suspected of imposing illegal taxes on the people "to feed his avarice and rapacity." A crisis was precipitated in 1634 when the second Lord Baltimore, governor of the new colony of Maryland, arrived in Virginia. Sir John Harvey supported Baltimore against the most ardent desire of the Virginia colonists, who loathed everything about their neighbor and competitor in the Chesapeake Bay. Harvey reached his nadir in relations between the Council and the people, leading to the first rebellion in England's new world colonies. Dr. John Pott was among the most prominent of the Virginia rebels, and shares prime responsibility for instigating the first revolution in America.

From 1634-1635 the councillors and other eminent citizens held secret meetings to discuss Harvey's misconduct. Dr. Pott led popular agitation against the governor. He traveled throughout the colony denouncing Governor Harvey, and persuaded many planters to sign a petition calling for redress of grievances. When the governor's sympathizers informed him of the secret meetings and the petitions, Harvey became enraged. Once again he jailed Dr. Pott, and apparently Harvey intended to execute his prisoner under authority of martial law. When one of the councillors objected to this arbitrary justice, Harvey struck him and said "I arrest you upon suspicion of treason to his Majestie." At his point two other counsellors seized Governor Harvey and declared that "we arrest you upon suspicion of treason to his Majestie." Meanwhile, Dr. Pott, near a window, raised his arm in a prearranged signal "when straight about 40 musketiers which before that time lay hid, ran with their peeces presented" and surrounded the house. Pott commanded them "stay until there by use of you."[10]

The revolutionaries placed John Harvey under guard and confined him



Memorial plaque located in restored church, Jamestown Island, on the original foundation of the first permanent English church in the New World

to his home. In April 1635 an assembly was called and the people's grievances against Harvey were stated. Captain Francis West was elected deputy governor. The deposed Harvey was forced to return to England against his will; Pott traveled on the same ship with his old enemy to testify against him in England. But Harvey had many powerful friends and his account of the "treasonous actions" in Virginia was accepted. Pott and the other collaborators were convicted of treason but were acquitted less than one year later when reliable witnesses from Virginia arrived in England with true accounts of Harvey's actions. Pott returned to his family home in Cheshire where he continued to lobby against John Harvey. He died without issue sometime before 1642, and a court record of that year refers to Captain Francis Pott as his "brother and heir."

Life was precarious in colonial Virginia, and the emphasis was on survival. In an uncomplicated society preoccupied with the essentials of daily living, a man could be convicted of numerous crimes and still rise to become governor of the colony, only to be later deposed and convicted of treason. The triumphs and turmoils of Dr. Pott accurately reflect the difficult nature of society in colonial Virginia. As physician, leader, and revolutionary, Dr. John Pott served as a vital force in shaping the history of the Jamestown colony.

REFERENCES

1. Blanton, W. B.: *Medicine in Virginia the Seventeenth Century*. Richmond, Va., Byrd Press, 1930, p. 16-17.
2. Morgan, E. S.: The first American boom: Virginia 1618 to 1630, *William Mary Quart. 28*:186, 1971.
3. Blanton, op. cit., pp. 18-19.
4. Ibid., p. 33.
5. Ibid., p. 25.
6. Hening, W. W.: *The Statutes at Large*. Richmond, Va., Pleasants, 1809, p. 135.
7. Ibid. pp. 131-53.
8. Squires, W. H. T.: *Through Centuries Three*. Portsmouth, Va., Printcraft, 1929, pp. 124-25.
9. Wertenbaker, T. J.: *The Shaping of Colonial Virginia*. New York, Russell and Russell, 1910, pp. 60-84
10. Ibid., p. 76.